

Coming Home: In the Flesh¹
Matthew 1:18-25; John 8: 51-59
December 14, 2014
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[Pray]

Please open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 1.

Today is the third Sunday in our “Coming Home” Advent series. And if you’ve been with us you know that Advent means “coming” or “arrival” and it refers really to two events. First it refers to the time leading up to when Jesus came as a baby, born in a stable to poor peasants 2000 years ago. And second, Advent refers to where we find ourselves right now as we wait for Jesus to return victorious and in glory, surrounded by a host of angels at the end of time.

But today we are going to focus on the first Advent and the claim that something impossible happened that changed everything. So look with me at verse 23.

[Read Matthew 1:23]

2000 years ago a young, unmarried and un-sexually active girl – probably 13 years old – got pregnant because God made her pregnant. God was using her to bring about a plan that He had put in motion infinite years earlier to make a way for fallen humanity to be with Him again. And this girl had a baby that people called “Immanuel” which means God with us.

Friends that’s the claim – it really is an impossible claim – and if it is true, it changes everything.

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Now let me set the context for you.

In the Garden, at the beginning of time, people were made in God’s image which means we were made to do what He does and share in His authority. We are creative beings He has placed in dominion over creation.

But bearing God’s image also means that we are capable of living in relationship with Him – and that is actually why we exist. God didn’t make us because He was lonely or bored; the Bible tells us He was perfectly happy and content and it was out of that perfection that He decided to create beings capable of sharing in the joy of His presence. And so He made people.

¹ Outline of sermon adapted from Pastor Mark Clark’s sermon (Accessed Dec 11, 2014): <http://www.thisisvillagechurch.com/our-media/sermons/welcome-home-3-in-the-flesh/>

But then something happened. While we were created able to go for walks with God in the Garden, things didn't stay this way for long. We sinned, we chose autonomy over obedience, we wanted to be our own gods, we didn't want to do life His way, and we fractured the relationship between ourselves and our Creator.

And when this fracture took place everything in creation was affected. Everything got broken and pain and sickness and death entered the picture.

And anyone can tell you this is the case today, whether they believe in Jesus or not. When people get murdered or robbed or young people get sick and die everyone says "that's not right." And the reason we say that is because there is something inside us that remembers that we weren't created for this. Sickness and death weren't the original plan. And so we long for a time when things will be better, when we will be back in the presence of God like we were in the beginning.

And people from all time have been longing for this. Hundreds of years before Jesus was born God spoke to His people through the prophet Malachi saying:
 I will send My messenger, who will prepare the way before Me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the Messenger of the Covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.
 (Malachi 3:1-2)

This is the story of Advent. This is the story of the Bible. That though we fractured the relationship between ourselves and our Creator, God is making a way for us to be with Him again.

And we resonate with this story – don't we? In fact people have been re-telling this same story in various forms forever. If you've read the Hobbit or seen the movies you know this story.

The great dwarf city of Maribor was captured by the dragon Smaug and the dwarves were forced to flee their beloved mountain. But there was a prophecy that Thorin son of Thrain would return. The true king under the mountain would regain his throne and make things right.

And the reason we love stories like this is because in our minds we have this hope that a Great King will return to our land and bring things back to the way they were designed to be. This is our story! We've been in the Garden so we know that where we are living right now could be different.

And into this story John 1 tells us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was

life, and that life was the light of all mankind.... The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. (John 1:1-4; 14)

And when the Word, when Jesus, became flesh we call that the incarnation. And that comes from the Latin word *incarne* which means “into meat.” God, who is spirit, took on flesh and bone. And this is what Advent is about.

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So if you are here today and for you this season is all about spending time with your family and eating great food and listening to good music and wearing great sweaters but throughout it you find yourself not really worshipping or loving or adoring Jesus more this year than you did last year then you’re missing something. Because Advent is about God putting on meat to make a way for you to be with Him again.

And when we get this, when we understand what Jesus did in Advent, it changes us. And it has been changing people, reviving the poor and the downcast, transforming skeptics into believers, for 2000 years.

So if you still have Matthew 1 open look back to verse 18 and the story of Joseph. Joseph was a skeptic who was transformed by Advent.

[Read Matthew 1:18]

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The story of Jesus’ incarnation needs to be understood in its context if it is going to be understood at all. And the two points of context that are pivotal today are the first century betrothal system and the skepticism that Joseph was steeped in.

Now betrothal in the first century was not at all like engagement today. Back then people who were betrothed would spend 100% of the time they spent together surrounded by other people. They didn’t date like we do today. And they didn’t do this primarily because they valued sexual purity as one of the major ways people honoured God.

And they weren’t naïve. They knew that if you put two people of different genders together in a room, on a couch, with the lights low and some romantic Jennifer Aniston movie playing in the background stuff is going to happen that should be saved for marriage. You’re not supposed to be able to win that battle. And so they didn’t put people in these situations.

And verse 18 makes this very clear. It says “before they came together” – this is first century language for “before they had sex” – Mary was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.”

Now why did Jesus have to be born of a virgin? Why make this impossible claim part of the Advent story? Isn’t it hard enough to believe God became a man at all? Why make Him born of a virgin?

Jesus had to be born of a virgin because humanity needed a Saviour who wouldn't be broken like the rest of us are. And people are broken not just because we all do bad things – though there is no doubt about that. Our brokenness is genetic; it goes right back to Adam and Eve and something that got fractured in the Garden. After our first parents ate that apple and opted for autonomy over obedience we've not only been following their lead in action but our identities have changed, we became sinners by nature.

And so in order for God to make a way for us to be with Him again we needed a perfect person to take our place. And in order for a perfect person to exist they had to be born without what we call "original sin." And so Jesus' DNA had to be God's not Joseph's.

So that's the betrothal system in the first century and why Christians claim Jesus was born of a virgin. But even with that system in place, while much rarer than today, pregnancies did still occur outside marriage.

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And so when Mary called Joseph up and said "Something great has happened, I'm going to have God's baby" Joseph did what any sane man who was engaged to a woman who was pregnant with someone else's baby would do. He doubted her story. Joseph was the first skeptic of the incarnation. Look at verse 19.

[Read Matthew 1:19]

Joseph didn't believe Mary, but then he encountered Advent. Look at verse 20.

[Read Matthew 1:20-21]

Joseph encountered Immanuel and it changed everything.

Friends, there is power in this story because Jesus was not just a good teacher or a wise prophet or a profound mystic. There is power in this story because a young woman had a baby who was God. And Joseph became a believer.

Actually tradition tells us, while they started out doubting, lots of Jesus' family and closest friends ended up believing He was God – lots of them!

Now let me let you in on a little secret. Strangers think I'm great – it comes with being a pastor. And so I often talk with people who hardly know who I am but have very inflated ideas about me – it's strange really. But do you want to know what kinds of people don't suffer from an over inflated view of who I am? People who know me! And the better you know me the more true this is. Ask my wife if I'm any good at cleaning the bathroom or putting my dirty clothes in the hamper. She has a very realistic view of who I am.

But Jesus' family and closest friends came to believe He was God with us. They believed Jesus was God's answer for how He was going to make a way to be with us again.

Mary treasured up everything about Jesus in her heart. James, one of Jesus' brothers, became the bishop of Jerusalem and was killed for his faith², and guys like Peter who knew Jesus intimately went to their deaths refusing to deny Him.

Friends people who knew Jesus well believed in Him. So who was He?

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Now lots of people have very different ideas about who Jesus was. For example Hinduism says Jesus was god, but by that they mean he was a reincarnation of Krishna.

Islam says Jesus was a man and a great prophet but inferior to Mohammad.

The Jehovah's Witnesses says Jesus was a created being, actually the incarnation of Michael the Arch Angel.

Mormons say Jesus was only a man who became one of many gods just like the rest of us can if we follow his example. They also believe he was a polygamist and a half-brother of Lucifer.

New Age Philosopher Deepak Chopra says Jesus is a state of consciousness we can all aspire to.

Scientology – which is the religion of brilliant people like Tom Cruz, says Jesus is an implant forced upon a thetan about a million years ago.

My dad was born in Manitoba and used to tell me stories of the Doukhor, a Canadian cultic group who lived near where my family comes from who believed the word "Jesus" in the Bible was a code word for lighting things on fire and getting naked.

So there are lots of pretty intense and out there beliefs about who Jesus is. But among those pretty intense and out there beliefs is one that says Jesus was YHWH with skin on. He is the Creator of the Cosmos come to earth in human form. And the craziest thing is that Jesus believed this about Himself.

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Now among world religions only two who ever came to suspect that their leaders were god – Christianity and Buddhism. These two groups looked at their leader and said there is something about the way you live, the things you say, how you carry yourself that leads us to believe you aren't like the rest of us. We think you are god.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_the_Just

And both Buddha and Jesus were asked to clarify this. And they both answered their questioners, but they responded in totally opposite ways.

When Buddha was asked if he was a god he responded “No I’m not, I’m an enlightened one who can show you the way to enlightenment.” Buddha did not see himself as god. But Jesus responded in a very different way.

Turn in your Bibles to John chapter 8.

Now as we look here remember that Jesus was a Jew and lived among Jewish people who would be the last people on earth to think a person could be God because the book of Numbers told them:

God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. (Numbers 23:19)

And so when Jesus began doing and saying things that only YHWH did or said like forgiving sins or healing the sick or walking on water people began to get pretty concerned. So look at what Jesus says about Himself in verse 51, and see how the people responded:

[Read John 8:51-53]

They want to know who Jesus thinks He is because in Jewish thought it isn’t alright to think you are God – that’s a scandalous crime worthy of death. Now Jesus knew this and so He could have back-peddled here and escaped crucifixion, but look how He responds. Verse 54.

[Read John 8:54-57]

Jesus isn’t treading on thin ice here, He’s smashing through it! He says “you liars don’t know who God is. But I do. And you think Abraham was your prophet, but I’ve chatted with Abraham and He is pretty excited about Me.” That’s offensive!

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Now there is this strange thought within popular culture today that says Jesus was a real man, He was a good teacher and we should do what He said, but we shouldn’t go so far as to think He is God. But friends that doesn’t work. Jesus can’t say the things He says and be just a good teacher.

Many of you know C.S. Lewis had some great things to say on this in his book “Mere Christianity.” He said:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg

— or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”³

Friends, Jesus made it incredibly clear who He thought He was. Look at 58.

[Read John 8:58]

Now I often get mistaken for being in my early twenties, and occasionally even younger, and people are shocked that I’m a “senior pastor” with a Master’s degree, three kids and one more on the way. And I have to tell people actually I’m older than I look – one day people say I’m going to appreciate this.

But archaeology and biblical lineage tell us Abraham lived about 4000 years ago so you do the math on what Jesus says here.

The point is if Jesus wanted to tell these people hey I’m older than I look – I was around when Abraham was – He could have used a lot better grammar to do it. He could have said “before Abraham was born, I was a friend of his parents.”

But Jesus doesn’t say that, and He isn’t bad at grammar. What Jesus says here is carefully crafted. He says “before Abraham was, I AM.” And these words were sacred to the Jews and absolutely scandalous to use about one’s self. These were the words God used to refer to Himself.

Two weeks ago we talked about God speaking to Moses at the burning bush where Moses asked Him what His name was so that he could tell the rest of Israel, and God responded:

I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14)

And Jesus uses these words sacred about Himself! No wonder people got mad.

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Now at this point one of the craziest things I’ve heard people say is “well since Jesus never said ‘I am God’ – which is true, Jesus never strung these three words together – we are just misinterpreting what He says here, and people in the first century never thought Jesus was claiming to be God.”

But that’s just ludicrous. Look at how people responded to Jesus in verse 59.

[Read John 8:59a]

³ Lewis, C. S., [Mere Christianity](#), London: Collins, 1952, pp. 54 – 56.

In history very few people have been stoned for speaking with bad grammar. So that's not what's going on here. Everyone who was listening to Jesus knew what He was saying and it offended them deeply because He was saying I AM YHWH.

And this isn't the only time this happened. Turn over the page to John 10 and verse 30. Here Jesus continues this same line of thinking and people respond the same way. He says:

[Read John 10:30-31]

But in this instance Jesus asked for them to clarify their anger. Look at the next verse.

[Read John 10:32-33]

The Jews knew exactly what Jesus' words meant, and they had a severe problem with them because Jesus was claiming to be God.

Now these were people who didn't know Jesus well, they had heard Him teach, perhaps they had seen some of the miracles. But they didn't believe and they remained skeptics.

But some others, a lot closer to Jesus believed. And Joseph was one of those. The end of Matthew chapter 1 tells us Advent changed Joseph from a skeptic into a believer. When he woke up from his dream he concluded the angel he had seen and the message he had received were not the result of eating pizza before bed, and verse 24 tells us:

[Read Matthew 1:24-25]

This is what Advent is about. Advent is about God putting on flesh and living among us to change us so that we can enjoy the relationship with God He created to enjoy in the beginning.

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So where do you find yourself today? What does it mean that God became a person to make a way for you to be with Him again?

I think there are two conclusions this should lead us to.

First the fact that Jesus claimed to be YHWH *incarne*, YHWH in meat, means it matters who you believe Jesus was. Like C.S. Lewis says, we don't have a lot of options when it comes to Jesus, either He was a liar, or he was a lunatic, or He was and is God.

And so that means Jesus can't be who most of the world thinks He was. He can't be Michael the arch angel, or the half-brother of Lucifer, or just a great prophet, or a reincarnated form of Krishna. Those options just aren't available to those who heard what Jesus said about Himself.

And so ask yourself, who do I believe Jesus is?

Sure you are familiar with the name Jesus, but so are most of the people in the world. Is the Jesus you know the Jesus of the Bible? Is He God who put on skin to take your place and the punishment for your sin so that you could be with God again? Because if He is that should change everything about the way you live.

If not, then you haven't met Jesus and I encourage you to come and talk to me after the service and get this figured out.

The second implication of Jesus putting on skin is one that brings comfort to the weariest people.

As most of you know Nikki and I lived in Korea before we came back to Prince George, and one of the things this has opened up for me is an in with every Korean person I meet.

When I talk to a Korean I am able to say a few things in their language and I can tell them I've been to Korea. And every time I've done this I've got the same response – their eyes light up and they are really excited to talk with me. Why? Simply because I've been there.

And this is the way it is with Jesus. No matter where you find yourself today, no matter how bad it is, or how hard it is, or how messy it is, Jesus has been where we are. He knows what it means to walk in your shoes because He has been one of us.

And this is what Advent is about. God went to extreme lengths to make a way for us to be with Him again.

This is the God Joseph encountered and it changed His life. He met Jesus with skin on, in fact Jesus came and lived in his house, and he was never the same.

So brothers and sisters this Advent God is reaching out to you. Come and meet Him, meet Jesus in the flesh, and let Him change you. Let Him give you life and joy and hope. Friends God has gone to extreme lengths to make this possible. Jesus was born of a virgin to make a way for sinners like us to be with God again.